

Washington: The 'Blackest Name' in America

By Jesse Washington
AP National Writer

George Washington's name is inseparable from America, and not only from the nation's history. It identifies countless streets, buildings, mountains, bridges, monuments, cities — and people.

In a puzzling twist, most of these people are Black. The 2000 U.S. Census counted 163,036 people with the surname Washington. Ninety percent of them were African-American, a far higher Black percentage than for any other common name.

The story of how Washington became the "Blackest name" begins with slavery and takes a sharp turn after the Civil War, when all Blacks were allowed the dignity of a surname.

Even before Emancipation, many enslaved Black people chose their own surnames to establish their identities. Afterward, some historians theorize, large numbers of Blacks chose the name Washington in the process of asserting their freedom.

Today there are Black Washingtons, like this writer, who are often identified as African-American by people they have never met. There are White Washingtons who are sometimes misidentified and have felt discrimination.

There are Washingtons of both races who view the name as a special — if complicated — gift.

And there remains the presence of George, born 279 years ago on Feb. 22, whose complex relationship with slavery echoes in the Blackness of his name today.

George Washington's great-grandfather, John, arrived in Virginia from England in 1656. John married the daughter of a wealthy man and eventually owned more than 5,000 acres, according to the new biography "Washington: A Life," by Ron Chernow.

Along with land, George inherited 10 human beings from his father. He gained

more through his marriage to a wealthy widow, and purchased still more enslaved Blacks to work the lands he aggressively amassed. But over the decades, as he recognized slavery's contradiction with the freedoms of the new nation, Washington grew opposed to human bondage.

Yet "slaves were the basis of his fortune," and he would not part with them, Chernow said in an interview.

Washington was not a harsh slaveowner by the standards of the time. He provided good food and medical care. He recognized marriages and refused to sell off individual family members. Later in life he resolved not to purchase any more Black people.

But he also worked his slaves quite hard, and under difficult conditions. As president, he shuttled them between his Philadelphia residence and Virginia estate to evade a law that freed any slave residing in

seeking to recover his slaves who escaped."

In his final years on his Mount Vernon plantation, Washington said that "nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union."

This led to extraordinary instructions in

Still, historian Henry Wiencek says many enslaved Blacks had surnames that went unrecorded or were kept secret. Some chose names as a mark of community identity, he says, and that community could be the plantation of a current or recent owner.

"Keep in mind that after the Civil War, many of the big planters continued to be extremely powerful figures in their regions, so there was an advantage for a freed person to keep a link to a leading White family," says Wiencek, author of "An Imperfect God: George Washington, His

Slaves, and the Creation of America." Sometimes Blacks used the surname of the owner of their oldest known ancestor as a way to maintain their identity. Melvin Patrick Ely, a College of William and Mary professor who studies the history of Blacks in the South, says some West African cultures placed high value on ancestral villages, and the American equivalent was the plantation where one's ancestors had toiled.

Last names also could have been plucked out of thin air. Booker T. Washington, one of the most famous Blacks of the post-slavery period, apparently had two of those.

He was a boy when Emancipation freed him from a Virginia plantation. After enrolling in school, he noticed other children had last names, while the only thing he had ever been called was Booker.

"So, when the teacher asked me what my full name was, I calmly told him, 'Booker Washington,'" he wrote in his autobiography, "Up from Slavery." Later in life, he found out that his mother had named him "Booker Taliaferro" at birth, so he added a

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his will that all 124 of his slaves should be freed after the death of his wife. The only exception was the slave who was at his side for the entire Revolutionary War, who was freed immediately. Washington also ordered that the younger Black people be educated or taught a trade, and he provided a fund to care for the sick or aged.

"This is a man who travels an immense distance," Chernow said.

In contrast with other Founding Fathers, Chernow said, Washington's will indicates "that he did have a vision of a future biracial society."

Twelve American presidents were slaveowners. Of the eight presidents who owned slaves

while in office, Washington is the only one who set all of them free.

It's a myth that most enslaved Blacks bore the last name of their owner. Only a handful of George Washington's hundreds of slaves did, for example, and he recorded most as having just a first name, says Mary Thompson, the historian at Mount Vernon.

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Pennsylvania for six months.

While in Philadelphia, Oney Judge, Martha Washington's maid, moved about the city and met many free Blacks. Upon learning Martha was planning one day to give her to an ill-tempered granddaughter, Judge disappeared.

According to Chernow's book, Washington abused his presidential powers and asked the Treasury Department to kidnap Judge from her new life in New Hampshire. The plot was unsuccessful.

"Washington was leading this schizoid life," Chernow said in the interview. "In theory and on paper he was opposed to slavery, but he was still zealously tracking and

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